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# Lincoln Centennial Address

Delivered by Jesse Holdom  
At McKinley High School, Chicago  
February 12, 1909

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# LINCOLN CENTENNIAL ADDRESS

Delivered by Jesse Holdom  
At McKinley High School, Chicago  
February 12, 1909



We meet today to commemorate the Centennial of the birth of the Saviour of the Union, through whose mighty struggle and sagacious intellect the Union was re-established and the seed

sown which has ripened into a Nation of world-wide power and influence, and which will ever be in the van of momentous activity in all that tends to the civilization of mankind. The name and the fame of Abraham Lincoln are immortal. High on the scroll of imperishable distinction his name and wondrous deeds shine forth to illumine history and instruct and enthuse the people of the world wherever righteousness and high ideals are struggled for and attained.

Illinois and Chicago, its metropolitan city, have the greatest incentive to participate in the tribute which today is being paid to the memory of this great man throughout the length and breadth of this Nation, for whose preservation he toiled ceaselessly and finally yielded up his life in sacrifice. For it was upon the fertile soil of Illinois that he was nurtured, and in the invigorating breezes of its flower bedecked prairies his physical and mental powers were developed to the majestic proportions which they ultimately attained. In the courts of Chicago many triumphs in legal contests stand accredited to him. After a political contest un-

equalled in the annals of political strife, pitted as he was against both the most crafty politicians and the wisest statesmen of his time and country, in a Convention remarkable for the gravity of the responsibilities resting upon it, at a time when the Nation was threatened with disruption, he received the nomination, as the first representative of the Republican Party, for the Presidency of the United States.

Here in Illinois, to the time of his nomination to the Presidency in 1860, he spent most of the days of his mentally conscious life. All that he was and all that came to him as a lawyer, State and National legislator, and finally as the Chief Executive of the Nation, he gained as a citizen of Illinois. His forensic struggles with the "Little Giant" of Illinois, the great Douglas, took place before audiences throughout the State. He fought the Indians in the Black Hawk war as Captain Lincoln. To the time of his election to the Presidency, save in the halls of Congress and in the Cooper Institute, New York, where his matchless, convincing oratory and pleasing and simple manners made him a national figure of the most colossal type, his voice was not heard except in the Capitol at Springfield or in the courts and upon the stump in political debate in Illinois. How fitting, therefore, is it, that we of Illinois should with gladness and pride commemorate this centennial epoch of Abraham Lincoln and join, with intensity of devotion to, and reverence for, his name and deeds, in this national celebration. And so we come today and lay upon the altar of his memory our loving tribute, and worship at the shrine of his glorious accomplishments.

This school house, dedicated to the memory of the martyred President McKinley, one worthy to stand in

the line of succession to the great Lincoln, and who was himself a soldier in the great army in the fight for liberty and a national government, of which Lincoln was, in virtue of his office, the Commander in Chief, is a place peculiarly appropriate for the conduct of these exercises. The aroma of the memory of both these martyred Presidents permeates the atmosphere of this place, hallowed for the time being with holy thoughts of the life and accomplishments of Abraham Lincoln.

What shall I say to you today about Lincoln? What can I say that has not already been better said? Lincolnian literature is bewildering for its immensity. All, however, that has ever been written about Lincoln is interesting to every lover of his country. And who has not read and re-read of the wonderful attainments and work of this great historical character? Had I been commanded to tell you something new about Lincoln, something not very generally known, I should have declined the task. So, while what I may say to you is but the old, old story of Lincoln, still, as you love and admire him and glory in what he achieved for the permanent good of our race and country, you will gladly listen, with cheerful hearts, to whatever I may say, no matter how well such incidents as I shall recite may linger in your memory.

The life of Lincoln is more fascinating in its interest than that of a Napoleon or a Caesar. It has more of character, which virtue admires, and more of lessons to be learned from noble acts of self-abnegation and sacrifice, which incite our interest and stimulate our patriotism and civic pride.

Like the founder of the Christian religion, he was "a man of sorrow and acquainted with grief." Trials

stirred his fortitude and molded his character from the cradle in a lowly cabin in Kentucky until he was basely and wickedly assassinated at the moment of the triumph of our armies in the holy cause of freedom, for which a sanguine and bloody strife had been waged for four long, weary and anxious years.

Lincoln belonged to the common people. When asked for his lineage he replied, that "it was the short and simple annals of the poor." He was cradled in poverty, and to the time of his maturer manhood confronted with the hardships of a pioneer life in what was then the Western frontier of our country. Poverty and hardship were, in his case, blessings in disguise. He lived the outdoor life. He communed with Nature. His soul thirsted for knowledge. His aims and ideals were lofty. He lacked the vices of adolescence. His life was as pure as the air of the prairies he inhaled. His body and mind were unpolluted and free from vicious act or thought and so remained to the end of his career. They were uncontaminated even after his contact with politicians, the diplomats of the world and the allurements of a gay capital.

Lincoln's career will ever be an inspiration and encouragement to those who seek to burst the bonds of lowly birth and go forth to higher things. Did he not obtain the rudiments of his education under the most discouraging conditions? Was it not a continual struggle for him to procure books to read, and then to obtain time in which to read them? He became, without a teacher, the master of English diction, and some of his writings and utterances today form part of the classical literature of the English tongue. Without university training or even a high school course, he is counted

as one of the greatest orators of his age, which encompassed Webster, Clay, Calhoun and Senator Douglas, the latter of whom he encountered in forensic discussion of the burning questions of the time, and thrilled the hearts of all who listened to his plain and forceful statements, made without any attempt at oratorical effect. His presence was not prepossessing, but he never spoke to an audience he did not win, and although many were the times he encountered gatherings which were hostile never did he appeal to them without winning their applause and convincing their minds.

Lincoln was noted for his rugged honesty, his simplicity, his directness, his good common sense and unerring judgment of men. The sense of humor he possessed in abundance. It was his solace in moments of stress and difficulty. His stories were always told to explain an otherwise embarrassing condition, or to emphasize a point under discussion. He talked at times in parables and they were as clean as those of Holy Writ. Whenever you hear an off story credited to Lincoln you may be sure it never sullied his lips. To so great a length did he carry this habit of telling humorous stories that he is regarded by some eminent writers as the father of American humor for which Americans have since become so justly famed.

Lincoln was as homely in his habits, as careless of his personal appearance, as any man who ever lived and attained distinction of the first order. He put on no style and assumed no airs. It is said that "he was his own wood chopper, hostler, stable boy and cow boy, clear down to, and even beyond the time he was President elect of the United States." In affirmance of his utter oblivion to conventionality, an author informs us



that "in Winter an old gray shawl was wrapped about his neck. His hat had no nap, his boots were unblackened, his clothes unbrushed; he carried a dilapidated carpet bag for legal papers, a folded green umbrella with the knob gone, a string tied about the middle, and the name 'A. Lincoln' cut out of white muslin in large letters and sewed on the inside. He always wore short trousers and usually a short circular blue coat, which he got in Washington in 1849, and kept for ten years, and which, like his vest, hung very loosely on his frame. He slept in a warm yellow flannel shirt, which came half way between his knees and his ankles. The changes which gradually took place in his dress, which reached its greatest elegance in his Presidency, were slight and marked no decrease in his own innocence about appearances, the improvements being usually suggested to him by his wife and friends. Lying on the floor in his shirt sleeves was a favorite attitude for reading. As he had no library, and the parlor, with its sofa, six haircloth chairs and marble table strewn with gift books in blue and gilt, expressed not his spirit, but his wife's, he often chose the hall for his recumbent study; and if women happened to call, Lincoln would go to the door attired as he was, and promise that he 'would trot the women folks out.'"

This unconventional man, however, was an indulgent parent, seemingly unwilling to cross his children in anything, and would romp with them upon the floor and was fond of taking walks with them and accompanying them to light entertainments, such as minstrel and magic lantern shows. Yet the tender-hearted parent, in the trial of a cause, was "hurtful in denunciation and merciless in castigation," as many a dishonest litigant found to his cost.

Lincoln had an inborn love of freedom and a natural antipathy to the holding of any human being in slavery. He was conservative in his course along these lines, for he early realized the seemingly insuperable obstacles to the abandonment of the slave traffic which was so securely embedded in the policy of the South. He saw the dangers of disunion, which he painstakingly sought to avoid. But early in his debates with Douglas the slave question was debated. As early as 1841 Lincoln on a steamboat journey from Louisville to St. Louis, saw twelve negro slaves shackled together with irons. In commenting on this episode, he said that that sight was a constant torture to him. Lincoln, in answering a speech made by Douglas upholding the Dred Scott decision, then lately decided by the Federal Supreme Court, uttered these ever memorable words: "I protest against the counterfeit logic which concludes that because I don't want a black woman for a slave, I must necessarily want her for a wife. I need not have her for either. I can just leave her alone. In some respects she certainly is not my equal; but in her natural right to eat the bread she earns with her own hands, without asking leave of any one else, she is my equal, and the equal of all others."

When Lincoln was the choice of the Illinois Republican State Convention in 1858, for United States Senator, against the protests of his friends, who feared that this would jeopardize his political future, he gave utterance to these sentiments in accepting that nomination: "We are now far into the fifth year since a policy was initiated with the avowed object and confident purpose of putting an end to slavery agitation. Under the operation of that policy, it has not only not ceased, but con-

stantly augmented. In my opinion it will not cease until a crisis has been reached and passed. 'A house divided against itself cannot stand.' I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved. I do not expect the house to fall. But I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing or all the other. Either the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction; or its advocates will push it forward till it shall become alike lawful in all the States, old as well as new. North as well as South." Here was foreshadowed the gift of prophecy, and while Abraham Lincoln lost the election to the United States Senate, in five short years thereafter he put pen to the Emancipation proclamation which struck the shackles which held in the bondage of slavery every negro in the land.

When Lincoln left Springfield to assume the arduous and difficult task for which the people had called him to Washington, he little dreamed that he would never again return to mingle in the business and social life of his old friends and neighbors, for when he took leave of Herndon, his law partner, he requested that the old law office sign of Lincoln & Herndon be allowed to remain, as in four years they would go on practicing as if nothing had happened.

A rather laughable incident occurred soon after Lincoln arrived at the Capital. He had prepared his inaugural address in Springfield, and a search at first failed to discover it, whereupon he remarked to a friend, "I guess I have lost my certificate of good moral character, written by myself. Bob has lost my gripsack containing

my inaugural address. I want you to help me find it. I feel a good deal as the old member of the Methodist church did when he lost his wife at the camp meeting and went up to an old elder of the church and asked him if he could tell whereabouts in hell his wife was. In fact, I am in a worse fix than my Methodist friend, for if it were nothing but a wife that was missing, mine would be sure to pop up serenely." I have some doubts of the veracity of this story, but we all know that the inaugural address popped up at the psychological moment, as well as Mrs. Lincoln.

At the threshold of his great responsibilities he realized the impending attempt to dissolve the Union. He did his utmost to avert it. In his inaugural he said, "I hold that in contemplation of universal law and of the constitution, the Union of the States is perpetual. To the extent of my ability I shall take care, as the Constitution expressly enjoins upon me, that the laws of the Union be faithfully executed in all the States. One section of our country believes slavery is right, and ought to be extended, while the other believes it is wrong and ought not to be extended. This is the only substantial dispute." To the South he said, "In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow countrymen, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war. The government will not assail you. You can have no conflict without being yourselves the aggressors. You have no oath registered in Heaven to destroy the government, while I have the most solemn one to 'preserve and defend it.'" Lincoln concluded with this pathetic and mystic appeal: "I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break, the bonds of affection. The

mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

The patience of Lincoln was comparable only to Job's. He met with opposition from all sources. Seward, Stanton and Chase, able and loyal men as they were, were thorns in the side of the President. He knew their worth and ability to serve the country in its distressed condition, and by his gentle forbearance and shrewd management of these great minds, never taking umbrage or showing any temper at their often displayed hostility, moulded them in such tactful fashion as to bring into play their exalted ability in the carrying out of the policies of the government in crushing the rebellion and restoring the unity of the States arrayed against each other in the death clutch of war. After the war was well started, there were talks of peace. Lincoln, realizing the impossibility of a cessation of hostilities, punctured the situation by telling a story about an Illinois man who was chased by a rampant bull in a pasture, and while dodging around a tree caught the tail of the pursuing beast. After pawing the earth for awhile, the bull broke into a run, bellowing at every jump, while the man clinging to its tail cried, "Darn you, who commenced this fuss?" Lincoln was so pestered with seekers after office that he was provoked to exclaim, "If our American society and the United States government are demoralized and overthrown, it will come from the voracious desire for office, this wriggle to live without toil, work and labor, from which I am not free myself." This class of persons, unfortunately, is not yet quite



extinct. Then there were squabblers for promotions in the army and navy, and the pulling of political wires from all over the country. Even the women took a hand in these distractions. A General once reproached the President for his exercise of the pardoning power, saying, "Why do you interfere? Congress has taken from you all the responsibility." Lincoln replied, "Yes, Congress has taken the responsibility and left the women to howl about me." Once he wrote to the officer in charge of the Adjutant General's office: "On this day Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_ called upon me. She is the wife of Major \_\_\_\_\_. She wants her husband made a brigadier general. She is a saucy little woman, and I think she will torment me until I have to do it," and the sequel shows she succeeded.

Lincoln was a natural diplomat and showed it by his actions in domestic and foreign affairs. In the Slidell-Mason-Trent affair he was instant in correcting a fatal mistake made by an over-zealous officer of the navy, and thereby averted a threatened war with Great Britain. Seward, the great New York statesman, concluded that with the inexperienced President from the West, he would be dictator in the Cabinet. Within a year Seward wrote, "There is but one vote in the Cabinet, and that is cast by the President." Soon after that he wrote to his wife, "The President is the best of us all."

Lincoln was a man who was lucid to the very core in all matters, in his messages to Congress and advice to generals, and while he at times bore insults from his inferiors, yet he ruled them inexorably and showed a character of greatness that the world saw for the first time.

Lincoln's sympathetic ear was ever sensible to the

cry of distress. Those in trouble found in him a helpful friend. Many a poor woman in the depths of despair, interceding with Lincoln for husband or son, withdrew from his presence with a heart freed from trouble, her desires granted.

But a few weeks before his untimely death Lincoln delivered his inaugural address upon entering into his second term of office. The concluding clause of his address reaches to the sublime and breathes a benediction. Emphasizing his belief in an omnipotent Ruler, he quotes this passage of Scripture: "The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether," and proceeds: "With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the Nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan; to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and all nations."

General Grant, the great commander of the Federal Army, speaking at the dedication of the Lincoln monument at Springfield, paid this tribute to Lincoln: "With all his disappointments from failures on the part of those to whom he entrusted commands, and treachery on the part of those who had gained his confidence but to betray it, I never heard him utter a complaint nor cast a censure for bad conduct or bad faith. It was his nature to find excuses for his adversaries. In his death the Nation lost its greatest hero; in his death the South lost its most just friend."

Lowell, in a beautiful poem on the death of Lincoln, written under the spell of a view of Mount Blanc as the mists slowly cleared away, revealing its might and

strength and grandeur, concludes with this ennobling stanza:

“Great Captains, with their guns and drums,  
Disturb our judgment for the hour,  
But at last silence comes;  
These all are gone and, standing like a tower,  
Our children shall behold his fame.  
The kindly, earnest, brave, foreseeing man,  
Sagacious, patient, dreading praise, not blame,  
New birth of our new soil, the first American.”











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